

Inge Hoonte

Department of Networked Media
Piet Zwart Institute
Karel Doormanhof 45
3012 GC Rotterdam
The Netherlands
ihoonte@gmail.com

March 24, 2011

Phil Agre
Department of Information Studies
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1520
USA

Dear Phil Agre,

Implicit in this letter are some ideas about interpersonal connectivity. Sometimes I poke through the soft membrane that lies between an attempt to connect, and finding connection. Let's call this membrane "X." Sometimes I shrub against it without knowing how to penetrate it. Other times I have no desire to come near this dividing line, or I might wait for the other party to make a move. Throughout these movements, a vulnerable web of introspective narratives is woven. In deciding to connect, some of these private fragments might be revealed to the public, even if only to one person or a small group of people. As a virus, this information then has the potential to spread into unknown directions. Parts of your innermost cravings, most banal ideas, and utter nonsense now belong to other people. You become a story, an example, "this guy I heard about." Other times, you remain hidden. What's silent, stays silent. What's in the brain, can't get out.

Mr. Agre, I haven't met you, but you seem to be admired, appreciated, and even loved among colleagues, and PhD, graduate, and undergraduate students alike. I'm aware that your former digital newsletter RRE still has over 600 subscribers even though you stopped circulating it seven years ago. I'm aware that both the website and the Facebook page that were set up to update friends, acquaintances, and total strangers of your whereabouts after you disappeared, is filled to the brim with messages from people you may or may not know, urging you to get in touch. Despite all this effort to contact you, I deeply respect your wishes to be left alone. In a way, it's amusing to think they've tried to contact you through the very channels you chose to abandon. And now I belong to "them" as well.

But first I should probably briefly explain my background and intentions for contacting you. I'm a writer, performance, video and sound artist with an interest in how notions of privacy, identity, and behavioral routines shape the tension between reaching out and keeping one's distance in interpersonal communication and interaction. I investigate the space between people, and the attempt to connect with one another across this

undetermined terrain: a constantly changing landscape amid physical, emotional, sociopolitical, and psychogeographical boundaries, among many other.

In many of your papers available on your UCLA homepage, you ask readers not to quote from this version, as it probably differs in small ways from the version that appeared in print. I hope you will forgive me for doing so anyway. I've only recently been introduced to your research and writing, and understand that what I'm touching on is just the tip of an iceberg. I'm referring to "an" iceberg and not "the" iceberg, as there are a lot of icebergs out there that I'm unfamiliar with, and I don't exactly know which one, or ones, I'm touching on. In fact, I'm not sure which iceberg you're on, or if you'll ever read this. However, in hopes to carve a way to what lies beneath the ocean's surface, I tried to formulate my thoughts in response to three of your papers in the form of three letters. I composed them simultaneously, and sent them all in the same envelope to three different addresses. I hope they reach you.

What follows is an attempt to further examine a few fairly independent notes, guided by the scientific, analytic, yet anecdotal style you set out in *Writing and Representation* (which the beginning of this sentence is also quoted from). One passage in that paper resonated with me in particular: "I often find that philosophy helps to interpret the difficulties that arise in my technical practice. And I want to believe that technical practice can help philosophy. In writing the stories that follow, I have explored some places where technical questions align with philosophical answers. I don't yet know how to convert these answers back into technical practice."

This brings me to the first story.

A few days ago, I met a man in a supermarket. On my way to the register, I turned into the coffee and tea isle, and there he was, wearing a sparkly, golden top hat. On a small, white piece of paper attached to his hat with clear tape, it read "3-6-1911." Neatly positioned on the front in squiggly handwriting, it complemented the printed "Congratulations!" My eyes widened, I was halted in my tracks, and after I complemented him on his fabulous hat by muttering only half of the word "wow," we started to talk.

He's turning 100 in a few weeks. He's been interviewed for a program on national TV a few times. When the producer asked what he's going to do on his birthday, he said he wants to spend the night with the Princess. He doesn't need to sleep in the same bed as her, no, he just wants... a kiss. He was unsure if the program will follow up on his wish, and although she has a pretty busy schedule, he was in good hopes that they will. "She's actually in Vietnam right now," and with an endearing smirk on his face, he continued, "Just a kiss..."

While talking, I switched my gaze between his milky, white teeth, and his similarly blurry, blue-grey eyes. I was captivated by their soft, dew-like quality. Locked into these watery, seemingly depthless lookers, I wondered whether all old men have such eyes, weathered by everything they've seen and experienced all these years. There was something about this man. His height and posture, the smirk on his face, the sparkle in his eyes, his obvious zest for things worth celebrating, sharing, and dreaming about in this life... His quirky demeanor reminded me of my late grandfather, who I last saw when he was so sick that he slept most of the day.

His frail body tucked in under a thick, grey woolen blanket, my grandfather's eyes would scan the room to look for me every time he came to from a short slumber. I was still there. Glued to the chair next to his bed and reluctant to leave, I held onto each brief moment our eyes met. We both knew this would be the last time we'd see each other, as I had moved abroad recently, and was only visiting for a week. When he passed away a few weeks later, my parents called me in Chicago at four in the morning, so I could be there with them. I wasn't. I wasn't physically there. I couldn't afford a last-minute flight to the Netherlands, so I rode my bike out to Lake Michigan and stared out over the water in the direction of my home country. His ashes were spread on the same patch of grass as my grandmother's. She died years before him, and he said she regularly visited him those last months. Even now that I've moved back here six years later, I haven't physically been back to any of these places. Traditionally, you could say that he lives on in my memory. To me it often feels as if he's still here, which might be caused by the fact that I haven't *not* seen him in that room ever since.

That day in the supermarket, I wished the sparkly 99-year old an early happy birthday, and asked what he would do once he reached a century. "I don't know," he said, "I don't know what to expect beyond that."

Best wishes,

Inge Hoonte

Inge Hoonte

Tamboerstraat 34
3034 PW Rotterdam
The Netherlands
ihoonte@gmail.com

April 9, 2011

Phil Agre
(ADD ADDRESS OF Homeless Care facility in LA)

Los Angeles, CA
USA

Dear Phil Agre,

I received an email the other day from a man named Bob Gielow. In the subject line it read "In Memory of Diane Gielow." I'm not sure which thoughts came first, but I think it went something like this. In the same split of a second,

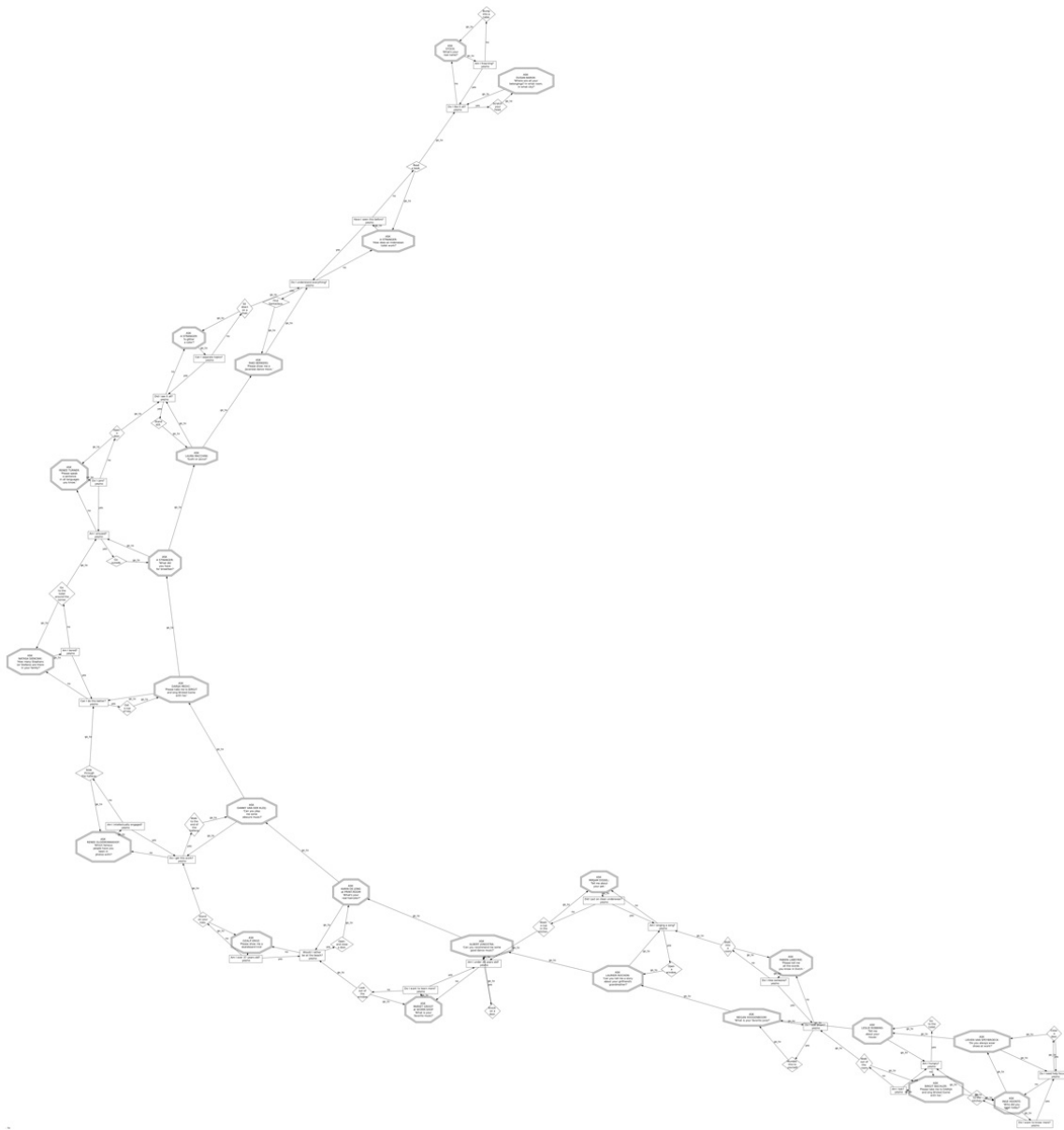
- I was hit by the terrible feeling that someone I knew had passed away,
- I recognized the email address as being the joint account of Mrs. Gielow, and her husband Bob by the same last name,
- I couldn't remember the woman's first name,
- I was hit by the terrible feeling that someone I knew had passed away, and I couldn't remember her first name,
- I knew I met her four years ago in a workshop in New York,
- I remembered being confused when receiving an email from Bob Gielow previously, which was actually written by the woman who's first name I forgot,
- I had a feeling, or I was hoping that her name wasn't Diane,
- I still couldn't remember her first name.

I opened and read the email, and gradually made the connection that it was not Bob's wife who died, but his mother. Bob, who I've never even met, but who's probably read a few of the emails I've sent to his wife Madeline over the years. Madeline, that's her name, not Diane. I wrote a reply saying my thoughts went out to his loss, but if he could please take me off the mailinglist as it was a very confusing and alarming experience to think that Madeline had died, even if only for a split second. Bob immediately responded, and apologized that I was included on "this one-time email because I thought my Mom had a friend named Inge."

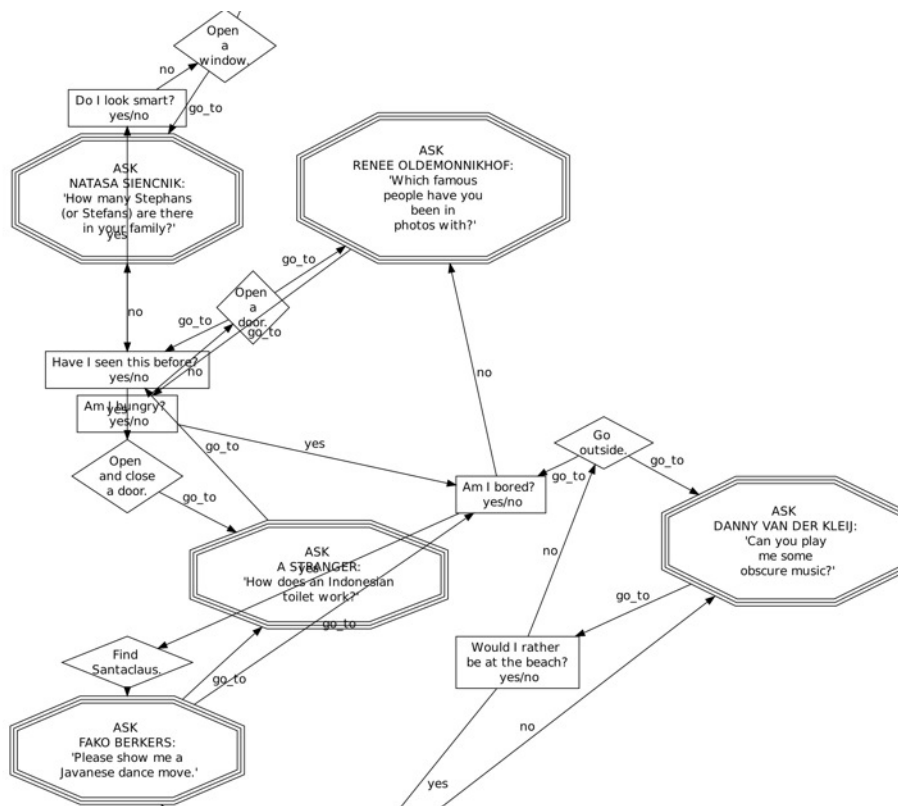
(ADD: Here I should probably briefly discuss how unintended recipients and unintended messages can be prevented. Google's free webmail service Gmail added two features in the past year, namely "Got the Wrong Bob?" and "Don't Forget Bob" which suggests people you might want to send your message to as well based on analyzation (ie tracking) previous correspondence.

<http://www.searchenginejournal.com/google-graduates-the-bob-gmail-labs-adds-mobile-undo/29415/>)

What I didn't tell you in the other letter, Phil, is that I started learning basic computer programming a few months ago. I quickly became interested in the poetic quality of command-line communication, the nature of loops, and thinking about a collection of text as a database. To establish unexpected connections between data and create new narratives, I wrote a python script full of loops to link variable Actions (A) to variable Questions (Q) to variable People (P). Inspired by the layout of flowchart models, I then turned to Graphviz, the open source graph visualization software. The program interpreted the textual connections in my script, and enabled me to visualize the connected nodes into a map-like image, such as a PDF format. I've copied a few details of maps below.



Each group of variables (A, P and Q) was split in half, and then connected to other nodes. There were over 60 nodes involved, in between which over 60 links crisscrossed one other. Thanks to the total amount of variables, and the algorithms that linked them, I was able to generate over 100 different graphic maps. Theoretically (and conceptually), this meant that every copy would deliver a different experience of the space the map was portraying.



The script premiered in beta-testing during a performative event. Individual audience members, or players if you will, used the maps to navigate their way through the venue space. Specific questions on the map directed the player to a person who was present on paper as well as in the physical space. As is the risk with beta-testing, there were bugs. In a few renditions of the script, and therefore also in the PDF's, hard copies, as well as in the live performance of the script, there were dead-end loops causing players to get stuck. If you got to node A5, let's say, it connected to P8, which directed to Q13, and brought you back to A5, through which you ended up at P8 again. As I couldn't rewrite the program to alter the existing print-out of the map, the advantage of beta-testing on a live audience allowed me to reroute the player by drawing a new connection between P8 and another node to escape the loop.

However many variables involved, what it comes down to is that the players of the alternative navigation model were subjected to a script. Albeit for the first time, they were mere agents performing a communicative routine. My intention wasn't to create a human metaphor for computation. Ultimately, I saw it as a design tool. I have since read your ideas on plan-following, routines, and improvisation within the tradition of artificial intelligence, and am intrigued by your argumentation for a shift of focus in this field, away from cognition and toward activity. In other words, to no longer confine the digital

abstractions through which we have modeled our physical world to the boundaries of the inside of a computer, as if knowledge bound by the dimensions of our own human brain.

But what does this mean? To stop researching "abstract processes in the head," the very way we've always approached mathematic problems, and to look at activity, "concrete undertakings in the world," as you set forth in your article Computation and Human Experience? If one only looks at the actions that are put out by "situated, embodied agents living in the physical world," can one understand its cognitive motivations for its social behavior?

Your humble correspondent,

Inge Hoonte

Inge Hoonte

Tamboerstraat 34
3034 PW Rotterdam
The Netherlands
ihoonte@gmail.com

June 13, 2011

Phil Agre
Ms Lee's address
USA

Dear Phil,

I used to think I'd run into my next boyfriend (a stranger at first) on the Brooklyn side of the Williamsburg bridge. An avid cyclist with a pretty bike and strong legs, I imagined I would meet him while descending the steep pedestrian and cycle path over the East River in high velocity. One fine day, probably a Friday night between 5 and 7PM, a somewhat distracted, hopeless romantic, equally avid cyclist would come barging around the corner and we'd forcefully slam into each other. Bikes would go flying, we'd be bleeding a little, and WHAM! Love at first sight.

Instead I found myself registered on an online dating site. As you might know, getting to know new people in such a way can be awfully daunting. Especially in New York, there's always the chance that someone smarter and better looking is just around the corner, so relationships are short and plenty. Still preferring to bleed for love, I deleted my account after three weeks and two dates.

One fine day (not on a Friday night), a guy whose profile I looked at, but decided not to contact, came walking around the bottom of the bridge while I was quickly approaching. This not being the type of descend you want to slow down on, as it is immediately followed by a sharp turn into traffic, I almost ran him over. I instantly recognized this "Jewish Elementary School Teacher," as he labeled himself on the website, as he wore the same button-up shirt as in his profile picture. He had a bit of a slouch, and was accompanied by a generic pretty blonde girl. Who does that?! Obstructing traffic on the bridge that's famous among local hospitals for its bicycle accidents. I stopped believing in slamming into true love at the bottom of the bridge right there and then.

When I was subletting an apartment in the south of Rotterdam earlier this year, I commuted to the downtown area every day by bike. To get from south to north, you can either log extra miles and cross the Maas river via the Erasmus Bridge, or you cut underneath the river through the Maastunnel. To get down to the tunnel, you get off your bike and descend a wooden escalator that was installed during World War II. Glancing over at the people who are slowly ascending (and vice versa) is a common daily activity among escalator users. As I have since moved to a neighborhood in the

north of Rotterdam, my chances of descending upon true love in slow-motion have massively decreased.

Phil, on many days I find myself preoccupied with what I have recently begun to label as practicing scientific research, that seems to want to answer to the following mathematical theory: the more I reach out to people, the more I desire people to reach out to me. As a mathematical problem, we should be able to define this relationship. To push this one step further, I wonder if I sometimes only send group emails with links to interesting articles, in hopes to heighten the cosmic possibility that as soon as I click the refresh button, an anonymous admirer will contact me. As a mathematical problem, we should be able to define this relationship as well. Or as Claude Shannon, the founder of information theory, stated in his famous *A Mathematical Theory of Communication: Introduction* in 1948: "The choice of a logarithmic base corresponds to the choice of a unit for measuring information."

Approaching the problem from a computational angle however, we could compare this relationship to a nested loop within a program. As desire is emotional and erratic, instead of a set interval for `(time.sleep)`, time would require a variable. I have yet to calculate how this variable relates to age, location, exercise, daily food and alcohol intake, received winks, glances, and other flirtations, the way I feel about my body (hot or not?), total amount of social interactions, in-the-zone-type time spent on research, compared to my freelance work load, estrogen levels, melancholy, and many other variables.

In the light of your analyzation in *Welcome to the Always-On World*, of our current, networked always-on world, one could say this approach is a more positive spin on being subjected to my own obsessive behavior of mercilessly staying in touch with people I barely see in person, in which every relationship I maintain has a continual presence. Because our relationships are always present, they require constant upkeeping, which is an activity based on routine, previous knowledge, and improvisation.

I was particularly inspired by the following passage: "(...) how can activity be both improvised and routine? The answer is that the routine of everyday life is not a matter of performing precisely the same actions every day, as if one were a clockwork device executing a plan. Instead, the routine of everyday life is an emergent phenomenon of moment-to-moment interactions that work out in much the same way from day to day because of the relative stability of our relationships with our environments."

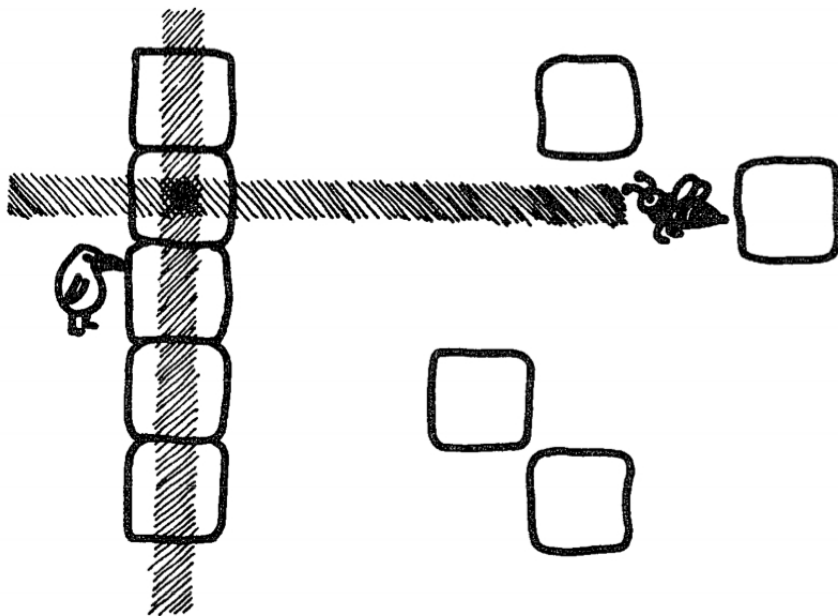
Are our relationships really that stable? Or is it our social behavior that we've formed routines in?

I'm especially interested in the play between hiding and revealing when it comes to desiring to connect to someone. The moment this condition changes, the moment in which what's hidden is revealed, is the moment I'm exposed as having an interest in someone. More crucially, I make the decision, whether intended or not, to point attention to myself by asking for attention, by asking to be acknowledged in someone else's presence. The act through which I'm identified as "attention-seeker" influences the way I perceive and display myself, obsess about how I might come across, what someone might think, as well as how I interpret a possible response. Put this way, it's both a vulnerable and empowering position to be in. Scientifically, it comes down to

following the positive outcomes of previous behavior in the pool of experiences, rather than the negative ones.

And what does a connection even consist of? What are the entree points through which to find companionship? Where do you break through your own routines to find something new? To move away from loneliness and ominous disappointment to surprise yourself? How can I stop bumping into the wall like all the other Lemmings, and inventively penetrate this membrane and actually... fall in love? Phil, when considering all agents and environments involved, do you think we could analyze the abstract routines in my dating behavior, and write a script for a successful relationship?

Or are we all just Bees and Penguins, the disembodied agents that act in your Pengi program? Are we doomed to be preoccupied with approaching each other, and running away as soon as danger occurs? Restricted to acting out basic animal survival instincts, the Bees' only way to connect is when stinging the Penguin. The Penguin in turn, can only connect to the Bee by being victimized: stung, killed. Leaving gender aside, does that make me a Bee, or a Penguin? And are these roles really all that different from our everyday lives?



- the-block-I'm-pushing
- the-corridor-I'm-running-along
- the-bee-on-the-other-side-of-this-block-next-to-me
- the-block-that-the-block-I-just-kicked-will-collide-with
- the-bee-that-is-heading-along-the-wall-that-I'm-on-the-other-side-of

We've come a long way since Claude Shannon deemed the meaning of a message

irrelevant, now 60 years ago. With the ever-expanding modern, digital web that distributes and archives our data, I think there's space for "computational models of individual problem-solving," as you wrote in *Hierarchy and History in Simon's "Architecture of Complexity,"* to create islands of meaning in this vast sea of information.

As much as I realized in my first letter that I've only circled around the tip of an iceberg, I realize at the closing of the third one that this might be as close to the iceberg as I'll get. You might never read this. You might read this and decide not to respond. Or you might find yourself wearing a golden top hat in the coffee isle someday, being approached by a girl like me. Thank you for continuing to work on a vessel upon which to navigate those waters.

Warm wishes,

Inge Hoonte